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The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; 2 As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. 3 The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 4 John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. 5 And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem: and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.

1 Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth  
as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginn  
had perfect understanding of all things from the very fi  
the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been in  
Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of  
before God, walking in all the commandments and or  
barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.  
of his course, 9 According to the custom of the priest  
the whole multitude of the people were praying withou  
on the right side of the altar of incense. 12 And when Z  
said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is he  
14 And thou shalt have joy and gladness: and many sh

ings which are most surely believed among us, 2 Even  
masters of the word; 3 It seemed good to me also, having  
most excellent Theophilus, 4 That thou mightest know  
of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named  
name was Elisabeth. 6 And they were both righteous  
7 And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was  
he executed the priest's office before God in the order  
se when he went into the temple of the Lord. 10 And  
here appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing  
was troubled, and fear fell upon him. 13 But the angel  
I bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John.  
shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink

then, saying, I have found Israel, in whom I have desired. 12 And immediately the spirit driveth him into the wilderness. 13 And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him. 14 Now after that Jesus came out of Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, 15 And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel. 16 Now as he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. 17 And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men. 18 And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him. 19 And when he had gone a little farther thence, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the ship mending their nets. 20 And straightway he called them: and they left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants, and went after him. 21 And they went into Capernaum; and straightway on the sabbath day he entered into the synagogue, and taught. 22 And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the

# THE TALE OF A CHRISTIAN ATHEIST

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# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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The Inquirer is the oldest  
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**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
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# JE SUIS CHARLIE

## Editor's view

# Stand up for freedom

This issue of *The Inquirer* is going to press the day after the savage attack on Charlie Hebdo in Paris. It was an attack on creativity, on secularism, on freedom. And it was not the first time that the satirical journal was directly attacked by terrorists unhappy with what was published.

Some have said perhaps the magazine should have toned down its satire, been less pointed in its portrayals of Islam and Muhammad following earlier attacks. It's true that the cartoons and other content of the magazine may not have been to the taste of many people of faith. But we must defend the cartoonists' and writers' rights to create them. This is where a true commitment to freedom comes in.

No one needs to defend loving speech, bland cartoons, tasteful magazine articles. But it is on those hard edges — the disrespectful, the vulgar, even sometimes the pornographic, that freedom and creativity must be defended from all forces which attack them. Freedom either exists or it doesn't. There is no half way.

Perhaps, as non-dogmatic believers, we Unitarians can be a bridge among faiths. For today, as on so many days following barbaric attacks, faithful Muslims are feeling a special kind of pain. They have seen their faith once again abused and misused by a murderous minority to further its own twisted aims. They once again are called upon to condemn the violence of people they don't consider co-religionists — as if any thinking person would have endorsed it.

There is also a certain pain that comes with knowing those attacks will stoke the prejudices on their doorsteps. The morning after the Charlie Hebdo attack an explosion was reported in a restaurant near a mosque in Villefranche-sur-Saone, eastern France. There will certainly be more repercussions — from direct attacks like that one through to the small indignities suffered by Muslims at work, in shops, anywhere they come in contact with the ignorant and angry. There are times in all of our lives when we have been misjudged. It's a terrible feeling. But once someone has the wrong idea about us, it can be impossible to change. Most Muslims live with that every day as they see their beliefs defined by terrorists.

The men who walked into the Charlie Hebdo offices, guns blazing, were cowards; terrorists who, it seems proved the point that the pen is a mighty weapon. The way to fight back is to take up our own pens, relish our freedom and reach out to those they have wronged — including those who have faith in the *real* Islam.

— MC Burns



# Don't search for literal truths

A firm believer in 'Godness', **David Heap** looks at the story of Christ through an Atheist lens.

The more I read and researched around the subject of being a 'Christian Atheist' I came to realise that I was following in the footsteps of not only giants, but fellow travellers. So this is an innocent's journey.

First, definitions – from the Oxford English Dictionary: Christian: 'One who believes or professes the religion of Christ; an adherent of Christianity. One who exhibits the spirit, and follows the precepts and example, of Christ.'

Atheist: 'One who denies, or disbelieves, the existence of God.'

I'll begin with the second one. When I first attended the Dublin Unitarian church I would probably, if pushed up against a wall with a gun to my head, have grudgingly defined myself as an agnostic. Along the lines of Hamlet's telling Horatio that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in his philosophy. Exposure to many viewpoints over the years – in particular those of our then-minister and past-GA President Bill Darlison, and my own investigations into Unitarian history, development and beliefs and also of broader Christianity along with the other major religions – both historically and in the present day – have led to my current belief that no divine creative agency is responsible for my existence or that of the rest of the universe. Though I do believe deeply in what I could call 'Godness' – something we all share and which has produced religion and art and love – but by literal definition I am an atheist.

Back to Christian. As has often been said, Jesus wasn't a Christian. He was a Jew. He remained a Jew in a Jewish society under Roman rule all of his short life. As Karen Armstrong wrote more than 30 years ago, the first Christian was St Paul. Those disciples and followers of Jesus who had continued to follow his precepts and teachings after his death did so within Judaism. It was Paul, a generation later, who pushed the radical idea that Gentiles could join the infant church without being circumcised and becoming Jews. The early church split on this issue and the purely Jewish church withered away. But history is written by the victors, a theme that recurs when the 3rd- and 4th-century church made more rigid rules about orthodoxy, destroyed heterodox texts and even killed so-called heretics. Karen Armstrong expresses a belief that what she calls Paul's 'proud boasting of his sufferings [was] the beginning of Christian masochism'. She is also severely critical of his 'dislike of the body and denigration of sexual love'. She's not too keen on his insistence on the intrinsic inferiority of women to men either.

## Paul's inevitable influence

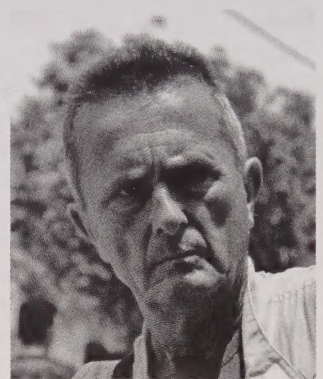
It's also important always to bear in mind that all of Paul's activity in the Jewish diaspora and his establishing, encouraging and chastising of churches around the Mediterranean predated the writing of the four Gospels, which inevitably bear signs of his influence as well as that of Jesus. It was Paul who also made the deity of Jesus and the Resurrection the foundation stones



*The only certainty is that Jesus' birth was nothing like what the Gospels say. Photo illustration by Margaret Young and NASA*

of the church's theology. Texts which indicated Jesus may have survived the crucifixion were expunged from the canon and, as far as possible, destroyed.

Now the Gospels: scholarship of the last 200 years has revealed many facts. We now know that Mark's was the first to be written, and that Luke (also the author of Acts) and Matthew drew extensively from him. It is also generally accepted that



*David Heap*

they drew from another source called The Lost Gospel 'Q' (short for the German 'Quelle'). There are more than 200 verses found in both Matthew and Luke which are not in Mark. Q is believed to be a collection of sayings and teachings of Jesus plus some from John the Baptist – collected after their deaths.

Writer after writer has insisted that the Gospels are not to be regarded as literal histories. As Bill Darlison would often say – and occasionally thump the pulpit whilst so doing – 'It's all a metaphor!'

## More study brought confusion

A favourite anecdote of mine is of a theology professor who walked into his first class of new students in an American Bible college and asked 'What did the Wise Men say to the shepherds?', then walked out – leaving the students to realise that what they believed a simple coherent narrative was, in fact, a jumbling of different ones. The shepherds and the kings appear in different Gospels.

The more I read about research to establish a historiography of Jesus from sources other than the New Testament, the more confused I become. The reference in the writing of the Romanised Jewish historian Josephus which was believed to add contemporary credence to the life and death of Jesus is now known to be a later interpolation. Other scanty fragments are also widely seen as similarly tampered with or at best ambiguous.

*(Continued on page 6)*



# Dorothy Tarrant: a Unitarian trailblazer

By Derek McAuley

The presentation to the General Assembly of the papers of Rev W G Tarrant (*The Inquirer*, 10 October) has been followed by material relating to his daughter, Dorothy Tarrant. She was mostly certainly one of the most prominent Unitarian women of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She was born in 1885 and lived until 1973 remaining active until her death; including proof-reading for the Lindsey Press and even, in 1972, addressing and filling envelopes for an Appeal for *The Inquirer*. Her great-nephew, Simon, remembers her memorial service at Essex Hall as does Alan Ruston.

She was a quite brilliant scholar and academic. At the age of 19 she sat the external examination for a London University Pass BA in Classics which was followed as a Scholar at Girton College, Cambridge by a First Class Honours Degree from London when she 21. Then she took a double-First in the Cambridge Classical Tripos. Yet Cambridge degrees were denied to women and she had to wait until 1927 to become a Cambridge MA. She was awarded a London MA for a thesis on 'The Genesis of Plato's Theory of Ideas' and became Assistant Lecturer in Classics at Bedford College. She rose to be Head of the Department of Greek in the College and Professor of Greek in the University of London in 1936, also attaining a London PhD.

She was of course a lifelong Unitarian and undertook virtually every role in Wandsworth and then Putney congregations. She was a staff member at the Summer School for Sunday School Teachers held at Manchester College, Oxford. A series of photographs of the schools from 1908 through to 1932 were included in the materials presented (see photograph). She held every office in the General Assembly and was President in



*The Sunday School Association Summer School at Manchester College, Oxford in 1932. Dorothy Tarrant pictured in second row; nine from the left. Alan Ruston has identified in second row; the Rev RV Holt (1<sup>st</sup>); the Rev Cyril Flower (2<sup>nd</sup>); the Rev Henry Gow, College Principal (8<sup>th</sup>) and the Rev Mortimer Rowe, GA General Secretary (11<sup>th</sup>). The Rev H Stewart Carter is on the 3<sup>rd</sup> row far right. We would welcome help in identifying others in the picture; particularly any of the Sunday School teachers.*

1952-53 – one of the very few women to reach this position in the early decades of the General Assembly. She was the first woman Trustee of Dr Williams's Library (from 1945 until her death) and served for many years on the Board of *The Inquirer*.

Temperance was a keen interest, and she was President of the Unitarian Temperance Association in 1948-51 and had a national reputation as a speaker. A copy of her 1924 pamphlet *The Child and the Drink Question* is also included on the papers.

Dorothy Tarrant blazed a trail both in her academic career and also within Unitarianism and the papers will be presented to Dr Williams's Library to join those of her father.

*Derek McAuley is Chief Officer of the Unitarian General Assembly.*

## League supports 'Singing for the Brain'

By Valerie Walker

Every year the Unitarian Women's League raises money for a different charity. The Appeal Project for 2014-2015 is 'Singing for the Brain' which is one of The Alzheimer Society's initiatives, a stimulating group activity for people in the early to moderate stages of dementia.

Most people have heard of The Alzheimer's Society, and many will have seen the television programme 'Living with Dementia' and may also be aware of the 'Dementia Friends' campaign which was launched early in 2014. That most of us will be touched in one way or another by this terrible disease is certain – parent, partner or friend; but we all hope that it will *not* be ourselves. The statistics are scary. More than 700,000 people in the UK have dementia; one in three people over 65 will die with some form of it. It can also affect younger people; there are more than 17,000 under the age of 65 in the UK who have dementia. There is currently no cure.

The Alzheimer's Society campaigns and funds research into the cause, cure, care and prevention. Dementia sufferers often remember their youth with clarity whilst having severe short-term memory loss. Music is a great memory trigger; it

also encourages communication and movement. 'Singing for the Brain' groups usually meet once a week, when dementia sufferers and their carers under a trained leader are joined by musical volunteers who lead them in a variety of activities encouraged by singing songs that they recall from younger years. It is not just singing, it is breathing exercises, hand, arm, feet and leg movement, recognising your own name and responding. The value to the carers of these gatherings also cannot be underestimated as they can share concerns and find friendship and support with others in a similar situation and some respite from their own isolated commitment.

Anyone without a local Women's League branch who would like to support this year's Appeal should send donation (cheques made out to 'Women's League Project Account') to the Project Treasurer, Mrs Eunice Smith, 39 Pegasus Court, Bury Road, Rochdale, OL11 4EA. A cheque for the total amount collected will be presented to the charity at the Women's League AGM at the General Assembly Meetings in March.

*Valerie Walker is a member of the Unitarian Women's League.*



# Make social action a cornerstone of faith

In the third in a series of columns about a Unitarian Vision for the future, **Rob Gregson**, director of *SimpleGifts* says it is essential for communities to reach out together.

Religious scholar Prof Charlie Hallisey tells this story about what it means to live a religious – and thus, compassionate – life. He writes, ‘There was a Protestant village in France during the Second World War that got involved, at great risk to themselves, in protecting Jewish refugees. The people who participated were extremely inarticulate when asked why they did what they did. They said, “Someone knocks on the door, you open it. You don’t think about it. You open the door.”’ How did they become so good? They said, “I don’t feel so good. I didn’t decide to do anything. I just opened the door.”’

It is a striking illustration. I have only one problem with this ‘parable of the open door’ and that is with the idea that the villagers, ‘...didn’t decide to do anything.’ I disagree; I think they did decide to do something. They decided to live a religious life in religious community. Unlike many in today’s rapidly secularising world, the French villagers were guided not simply by their own personal spiritual promptings. They lived in covenanted community: that is to say, their individual spiritual journeys were tempered in the flame of group devotion and reflection and emerged on the other side stronger and more purposeful than if they had gone it alone. It was in no small part this communal religious life that made their actions during the Holocaust seem almost second-nature. Of course we will open the door. How could we do any other?

It seems to me that we Unitarians and Free Christians sometimes stumble when facing similar, if far less stark, decisions. Our community ought to remind us – if it is to deserve both the titles ‘religious’ and ‘community’ – to open our doors, again and again, even when it is not comfortable to do so, even when we have other things that fill up our church calendars, even when we are small or primarily elderly or under-resourced or whatever it is that keeps us stuck in our own safe, small house. We speak a great deal about freedom of conscience; being a Unitarian/Free Christian also means that a deep theological claim is made on each one of us *within our congregations* to hone our communal conscience as well. ‘Slavery is bad. Stigmatising immigrants—not allowed. Loving our neighbours, even ones we don’t quite understand or struggle to appreciate – that is good.’ We may differ on who or what makes this deeper claim on our souls, our minds and hearts: God or our basic humanity or some other universal impulse we sense deep within. Where I would hope we would not differ is in agreeing that it is within the sanctuary and support of our chapel ‘home’ where that community conscience is made flesh. Doing social action as individuals is important and honourable; thinking that it supplants or makes up for justice-making congregations is to misunderstand why liberal religious congregations exist in the first place.

There is good news out there as well of course. Some have been quite keen to poke our heads out (together) and welcome in the larger world. Send-a-Child-to-Hucklow is in



Rob Gregson (right) with some of the families who attend programmes at *SimpleGifts: Unitarian Centre for Social Action* at Bethnal Green. Photo by Ann Howell

its 60<sup>th</sup> year of providing holidays to disadvantaged children, the Penal Affairs Panel and its work continues to remind us of our commitment to treating even the most outcast with humanity and basic dignity, and within the GA and the outside world we have collectively taken a stand on gay/lesbian/bi and transgender dignity and equal marriage rights. I like to think that *SimpleGifts: Unitarian Centre for Social Action* (for which I work) is a part of this ongoing effort as well, both at the community centre in East London and through ‘The Road Ahead’ congregational coaching programme to help chapels become more effective, creative and collaborative places in which to act on their communal conscience.

We at *SimpleGifts* are working hard to help congregations and our movement to think larger thoughts, to move together in common pilgrimage towards a more peaceful, more just, more compassionate UK and, ultimately, world. Of course we are not alone in this effort. All the same, many agree that the collective ‘we’ can be rather tentative when it comes to taking common action. ‘The Road Ahead’ coaching programme is only one suggestion for becoming more dynamic and proactive – from being a group adept at making motions (which undoubtedly have their place) to actually *moving* as a group in order to make the change we hope to see in our hurting, hopeful world. If we cannot or will not do that, then in my view we neither deserve to be called ‘religious’ nor a real ‘community.’ On the other hand, we have made common cause in the past, and there is no reason why we can’t ‘up our game’ again in the future. It is my hope that social action/social justice-making will no longer be a sideline within the Unitarian/Free Christian tradition, but instead a cornerstone of the engaged liberal religious life in 2015 and beyond. Here we are, still together, unwilling to be either museum curators or religious patients on life support. We live together, you and I, in a safe and welcoming house. Before us is the door, and the knock, and the need. Why not open it together?

*The Rev Rob Gregson is co-founder and programme director of SimpleGifts: Unitarian Centre for Social Action*



# If the Gospels aren't history

(Continued from page 3)

We can be pretty sure that the birth in Bethlehem is an invention. No census took place near that time, and the whole population returning to their ancestral villages would have caused months of total chaos. No record exists of a massacre of the newly born. I was told recently of a theory that Nazareth barely existed in the first century and grew after the destruction of the Temple and the expulsion of Jews from Judea into Galilee and, perhaps, partly because of the Gospel stories. At the other end of Jesus' life the story of the crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection seem to have been inserted almost intact into the different Gospel texts, which strongly suggests it was written later than all of them – well into the 2nd century.

## More certainty about John the Baptist

About two years ago, I got to a point where I seriously questioned whether a historical Jesus had ever existed, or if he had, whether he bore any likeness to the figure we are presented with in the Gospels. In fact, I was far more certain about John the Baptist, of whose existence and execution there is clear evidence.

I visited Qum'ran by the Dead Sea where the Scrolls were hidden and rediscovered and where a community of Essenes had lived at the time of John and Jesus. They were Gnostics, preserving and developing an older tradition of belief that was only accessible to the initiated, but still within Judaism. They seem to have been eschatologists – again the dictionary comes to my aid: 'concerned with the four last things: death, judgment, heaven and hell'. John certainly was.

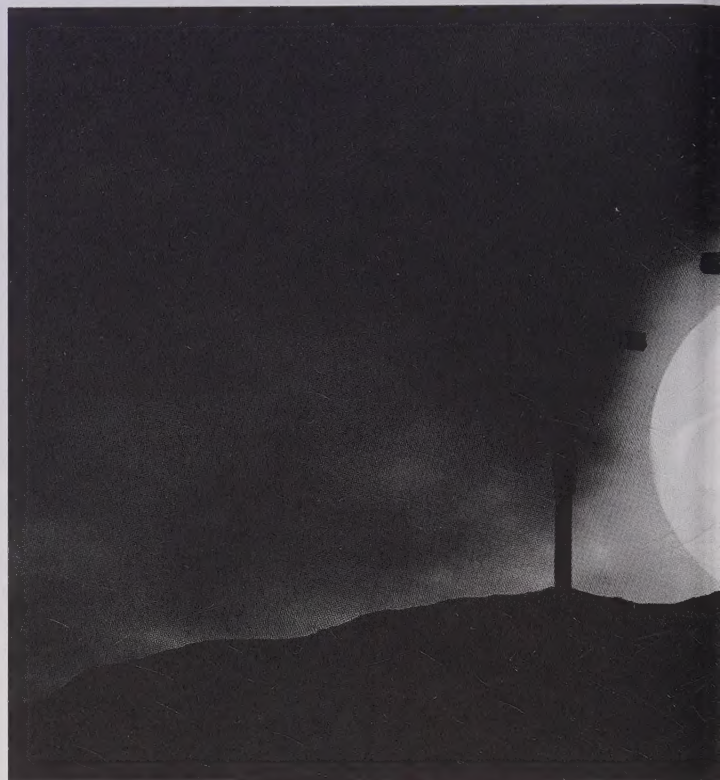
He may for a time have been a member of the community (the very dramatic audio-visual display at Qum'ran makes a lot of this, for the benefit of Christian visitors) and when he entered his ministry his mission was to get people ready for the end of time, the coming of the Son of Man, the arrival on earth of the Kingdom of Heaven and the triumph of the chosen people over their oppressors. Scholars argue it was the same for Jesus: that his entry to Jerusalem as the (fully mortal) Jewish Messiah, and the confrontation with the Temple authorities and the Romans that he and the most trusted disciple Judas Iscariot engineered in order to bring on this triumph, culminated instead in the defeat, agony and ignominy of the crucifixion. Some cite the cry from the cross of 'Why hast thou forsaken me' as evidence of this theory.

## What, then, is Jesus?

None of this helped me to really get a grasp of Jesus. A simple carpenter turned travelling teacher? An Essene? A sophisticated scholar who travelled to gain knowledge – even, as some think, to India where he learned of early Buddhism?

All I was sure of I shared with standard Unitarian theology. If he did exist he was human and not inherently divine, co-existent eternally with god.

Then I met up with an old acquaintance, Anthony Previt , who I had known when he was rector of the Church of Ireland church in Clifden, Co Galway. We had talked a few times before he was promoted to Archdeacon and away to the rarefied heights of the Church of Ireland. I found he had later left the ministry (or retired early), unable to live truly and truthfully under dogma, creed and authority of his church and superiors. When we met up again he said his entire perspective on Christianity was changed by a book: 'The Pagan Christ' by



Many Gospel stories had been told before. Horus, son of Isis, was Massey's research. Illustration by Bartek Ambrozik

Tom Harpur. It certainly changed mine.

What follows is quoted from it (in italics), plus my summaries:

*It is the premise of this book that very early on, in the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, the Christian church made a fateful and fatal error. Either deliberately, in a competitive bid to win over the greatest numbers of the largely unlettered masses, or through wilful ignorance of the true, inner sense of the profound spiritual wisdom it had inherited from so many ancient sources, the church took a literalist, popularised, historical approach to sublime truth. What was preserved in the amber of allegory, it represented as plodding fact.*

*The transcendent meaning of glorious myths and symbols was reduced to a farrago of miraculous or quite unbelievable 'events'. The great truth that the Christ was to come in man, that the Christ principle was potentially in every one of us, was changed to the exclusivist teaching that the Christ had come as a man.*

## A history that never happened

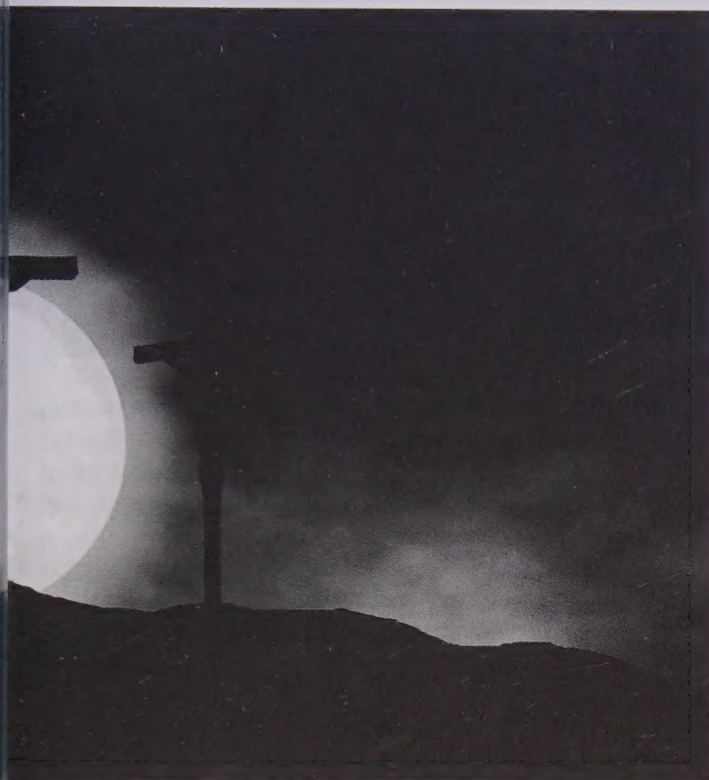
The implications are enormous: it means that much of the spiritual thinking of the civilised West has been based on a 'history' that never occurred. The Christian church was founded on miracles that were never performed literally. The book is based on centuries of scholarship, principally that of Geoffrey Higgins in the early 19th century, the eminent Egyptologist Gerald Massey at the end of that century and that of Alvin Boyd Kahn in the mid-20th, whose book *A Rebirth for Christianity* was Harpur's principle source.

*Far from being an original contribution to the world of religious thought, Christianity was turned in the early centuries into a literalist copy of a resplendent spiritual forerunner.*

There is nothing the Jesus of the Gospels either said or



# Do we believe in metaphors?



between two thieves, buried and resurrected, according to Gerald

did – from the Sermon on the Mount to the miracles, from his conception, birth, flight as an infant from Herod to the Resurrection itself – that cannot be shown to have originated thousands of years before, and can be found in Egyptian Mystery rites and other sacred liturgies such as the Book of the Dead. Though they probably originated even earlier.

Everything – from the star in the East to Jesus walking on water; from the angels' announcement to the shepherds to the slaughter of the innocents by Herod; from the temptation in the wilderness to the changing of water into wine – already existed in the Egyptian sources. Egypt and its peoples had knelt at the shrine of the Madonna and Child Isis and Horus for millennia before a supposedly historical Mary lifted a supposedly historical Jesus in her arms. But for all those centuries before the translation of the Rosetta stone in 1822, which enabled Egyptian hieroglyphs to be understood, the ancient key to all this Egyptian material had been lost.

Now, since the translation of the books of Old Egypt – the Book of the Dead, the Pyramid texts, the Book of Thoth and others – there is irrefutable proof that not one single doctrine, rite, tenet, or usage in Christianity was in reality a fresh contribution to the world of religion.

But the book is not a denial of the real truths of Christianity – the allegorical, spiritual and mythical approach to the Bible and to Christian faith – that is, the true spiritual Christianity, before 'Christianism' took over, and which solves the enigmas of Scripture and the Christ story as nothing else can do.

Our own potential for Christhood, and for experiencing the indwelling spirit of God here and now, sounds forth in a clear and relevant message for everyone.

The wisdom is what's important

The word KRST exists in carvings and writings thousands

of years before Jesus. The cross is a symbol that occurs and reoccurs many times in ancient religious iconography both East and West.

Space permits just one more example: Horus was also crucified between two thieves, buried and resurrected, according to Gerald Massey's research. These are huge claims and I haven't gone to the work of all the scholars that Harpur uses as his sources to examine them all in more detail. But in a funny sort of way it doesn't really matter to me if it is all factually precise. To go back to Bill – It's all a metaphor! What this has allowed me to do is look at the stories of the life and teachings of Christ – or of the Christ – in a new and very different way. I've been grateful to Bill, Dr. Martin Pulbrook in Ireland, writers like Robert Graves (with his novel *King Jesus* which started me on this 45 years ago), Philip Pullman (*The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*) and Colm Toibin (*The Testament of Mary*) for challenging the conventional view and context of Jesus in 1st-century Palestine, but to be now able to see the life stories, acts and teachings completely differently and removed from the need to contextualise them within Judaism and under Roman rule enables me to feel that I can aspire to share in what I now begin to understand as Christian. That a first century rabbi called Jesus brought this knowledge and wisdom out from the confines of an initiated few and preached it to everyone is certainly possible, but for me no longer crucial.

That there was such a figure upon whom to hang all the ancient myths and allegories could also be true.

But I am utterly convinced that the insights and wisdom of the ages are far more profound than the literalist truths in which conventional Christianity demands belief.

David Heap is a member of Dublin Unitarians.

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# What is the role of a Unitarian Minister?

At an induction service I attended a few years ago I heard the words of the American Unitarian Universalist Minister Gordon McKeeman that repeated a familiar refrain 'ministry is everything we do together.' I thought that those were very nice words, and certainly poetic and powerful. But they got me wondering; because, in a way, those words negated the very thing that was happening at that very moment. If 'ministry is everything we do together' then why do we need a person called a 'minister'? The purpose of that service was *not* for the congregation to commit to the work before them (though that might be a very good purpose for a service); the purpose of that service was for *one particular person* to be called by that congregation to a *specific role*. And yet what can we say about this process of calling a particular person to a specific role? In today's Unitarian community the answer is 'very little.' When asked to talk about 'ministry' the first thing we say is 'ministry is everything we do together.' Which is fine as far as it goes. But if there is nothing more to be said than that, the logical conclusion is that we should not have a separate 'ministry.' If we do have a separate 'ministry,' if we have 'ministers' then we need to be able to say *why* we have them.

That's why I'm glad the Ministerial Fellowship has been pondering this question about the nature of ministry. I believe we need to ask the theological question, 'why do we have ministers?' This is a seriously pressing question. As the Unitarian community struggles under the secular world of the 21st century, as financial pressures hit hard, congregations are asking the question: can we afford to pay the stipend of a minister? Why should we have a minister? What is a minister for, anyway? These are good questions.

It seems to me that in regard to ministry we are stuck between two 'theological instincts.' One can be labelled the instinct towards *equality*. The other is the instinct towards *education*. Both instincts have always existed in our tradition and both are good instincts, but they sometimes pull in different directions and we are stuck in the tension between them.

As Unitarians we affirm *equality*: our theological commitment is to the idea that each person has sacred inherent worth and value and is capable of discerning religious Truth using their own reason, understanding and spiritual experience.

And we also affirm the value of *education*: our theological commitment is to education, reason, the pursuit of truth and science. Ignorance is not a virtue, and all of us are called to deepen our understanding of truth by taking in as much truth and wisdom as we can.

Is it possible to construct a model of Unitarian ministry that respects these two instincts while serving to clarify the role of 'ministers' in today's Unitarian community? I believe so. I believe there are some phrases that help us understand what a Unitarian minister is, that are built upon our commitment to equality and to education.

**The Unitarian minister as ministry coordinator**

Ministry is everything we do together. Ministry is the work

## Ministerial Fellowship by Stephen Lingwood



of the church. The word 'ministry' means the work of serving. The Sunday school teacher, the flower arranger, the committee member, the pastoral visitor, the marcher in the protest: all of these people are most certainly involved in ministry, as they are all ministering, they are all serving.

But none of these activities happens by accident, or purely spontaneously. They take some organisation and coordination. Every human community, if it is to last the test of time, requires structures of organisation. As much as any group might resist it, structures are always needed. Even Quakers have clear structures. There are 'elders' primarily concerned with worship and 'overseers' primarily responsible for pastoral care. Roles and structures of ministry help a religious community to function.

So for the ministry of all to function effectively Unitarian communities need some kind of ministry coordination. Though, conceivably this could be done in all kinds of ways, the easiest way is for one person to be in the role of *ministry coordinator*.

Ministry coordination is not easy. A person in this role will need specialist skills and training. Everyone can offer their own form of ministry, but the task of coordinating that ministry of the whole community is a specialist skill. David Heywood, an Anglican priest, in the book *Reimagining Ministry* calls for ministry to be seen as something that is the work of the whole church. But he goes on to say 'the role of the clergy in this new model of ministry requires of them *more* professional expertise rather than less. But... their social role is no longer to be understood as that of the "professional", whose status is based on the possession of specialist knowledge. Instead their calling is to give away their status and power their training might qualify them for and by using their expertise to empower the whole church.'

Explicit in this model is the Unitarian commitment to equality. It must be affirmed that the person in this role is in no sense spiritually superior to others. The *ministry coordinator* does not belong to a separated and ordained class of people who are 'holier' than others.

**The Unitarian minister as theologian-in-residence and community spiritual director**

(Continued on next page)



The Unitarian model of ministry goes beyond leading from the front. Jane Barton leads a service in this GA Image Library photo.



# Matthew Smith inducted at Framlingham

Matthew Smith was inducted into the ministry of Framlingham Unitarian congregation on 22 November in a ceremony in the Meeting House led by GA President Marion Baker, Ipswich Minister Emeritus the Rev Cliff Reed, and the Rev Sarah Tinker – who worked with Matthew when he was at Unitarian Headquarters and is now minister at Essex Church, Kensington. Martin Croucher offered the right hand of fellowship as congregational chair to the new minister who also shook hands with all the members and trustees present as part of the ceremony. In giving the charge to the congregation, Cliff Reed stressed the importance of commitment to our liberal faith through regular worship attendance.

In the charge to the minister, Sarah Tinker cautioned against pastors trying to do too much or thinking they always had the answers. She illustrated this by sharing a story of the Sufi fool Nasruddin. Robert Waller provided the organ accompaniment to the hymns as well as sharing a composition of his own as a postlude.

Also in attendance at the service were the new Rector of St Michael's Framlingham, the Rev Canon Mark Sanders, and the Clerk to Framlingham Council, Eileen Coe. After the service, everybody retired to the United Free Church Hall for



(l-r) Marion Baker, Cliff Reed, Matthew Smith and Sarah Tinker at Matthew's induction. Photo by Martin Gienke

the obligatory superb tea!

Matthew Smith is also Unitarian minister in Bury St Edmunds and an induction service will be held there in the spring.

– Matthew Smith

## Ministers: Theologians in residence?

(Continued from previous page)

The model of *ministry coordinator* captures a great deal about what we mean by ministry in Unitarianism, but not all of it. There is another dimension to ministry. This dimension takes seriously the theological commitment to education. We can understand this dimension by using two phrases: minister as *theologian-in-residence* and minister as *community spiritual director*.

Historically, *theologian-in-residence* seems to be the most dominant understanding of Unitarian ministry. Being a *theologian-in-residence* requires the skill, the science, the art of relating the tradition, the intellectual understanding of the tradition, and ultimately God to the situation at hand in a particular community. The minister must lead the community into its own theological reflection. This requires teaching, prompting, questioning, inspiring.

Laurie Green calls this role being the 'people's theologian'. David Heywood writes, 'Rather than relating as professional over/against the community, she works *within* the community in something of the same way as the animator in community work, exercising the skills of the adult educator. While soaked in the Christian tradition, she must remain the servant rather than the controller of it, using her expertise to guide the process rather than claiming the right of final judgment, a role that requires considerable spiritual depth.'<sup>2</sup>

The role of *community spiritual director* is many ways the same as *theologian-in-residence*. By using both phrases I do not want to suggest a sharp distinction between two different roles. Rather I want to suggest two vital dimensions to the same activity. Both dimensions ultimately ask the question 'how does this relate to the Holy?' Theology asks this question with the mind, spiritual direction asks this question with the heart. Again I must emphasise that these are not separate but two dimensions of the same process.

Whereas a spiritual director accompanies an individual in

their spiritual journey, the minister accompanies the whole community. The minister does not dictate the will of God but asks prompting questions of the congregation: 'Where is God? What is our mission? Where is our joy? Where are we being called to go? Why are we here in the first place?' The minister asks the questions, but the community must answer them.

The ministry of a *theologian-in-residence* and *community spiritual director* is not one that anyone can fulfil. It requires a level of intellectual and spiritual depth and maturity. It requires thorough education and training. It requires a great deal of resources to invest in this. And yet without it, there is a danger of spiritual stagnation and decline in a congregation; without it a congregation may be so busy getting on with things that it cannot remember why it is there in the first place.

### We need ministers

It seems that Unitarians are much better at articulating our commitment to equality than we are at articulating our commitment to education. This means we find it much easier to say 'ministry is everything we do together' than 'we think it's really important to have certain people called ministers in our congregations.' We need to be able to say *both*.

I believe by thinking of Unitarian ministers as *ministry coordinators* and *theologians-in-residence/community spiritual directors* we can keep both of our instincts of equality and education in our sights and be faithful to both of them. We need the coordination and encouragement of the ministry of all in serving, and the presence of someone who helps us to understand our deepest *why*. For both of these reasons, we need Unitarian ministers.

Stephen Lingwood is minister at Bank Street, Bolton. This column is part of a series by the Ministerial Fellowship.

(Endnotes)

1 David Heywood, *Reimagining Ministry* (London: SCM, 2011) 183 (emphasis original)

2 Heywood, 136 (emphasis original)



# Letters to the Editor

## Missing volume will likely be found

To the Editor:

It is unfortunate that the denomination's First World War memorial volume cannot currently be located though a number of us have searched for it diligently. We expect to find it when the very large archive collection transferred from Essex Hall is catalogued. We applied for a grant for this purpose from the National Cataloguing project this year and reached the second round. Hopefully we will be successful next year and the missing volume will be found when the collection is fully sorted and catalogued.

**Dr David Wykes**

Director

Dr Williams's Library, London

## Both useful: Christmas *Inquirer* and a donkey

To the Editor:

The December issues of *The Inquirer* were a great help for Christmas readings at our Reading Fellowship – for example your own editorial and Art Lester's about the donkey and its 'won't power'. If readers want to know how Art knows about donkeys, they should read his latest delightful book *'The Demon Cat of Calle del Rio'*. (ISBN – 1326055194)

This tells how Art very nearly bought a donkey...

**Peter B Godfrey**

Stonehouse

## Haughland House is still accepting guests

To the Editor:

This is an update of 'happenings' at Haughland House, Shapinsay, Orkney. The Retreat Centre is still open until we find a buyer. However there are some changes.

We are now offering bed and breakfast and self-catering accommodation only, and there will be no organised retreats advertised.

However we are encouraging groups from churches, chapels and fellowships to take advantage of the competitive rates of £350 per week for up to 7 people, and run their own retreats or activity group such as a yoga or craft week. Also, there is a potter on the island who is happy to offer instruction,



*The chapel at the Haughland House Retreat Centre features a stained-glass window, bearing a Unitarian Chalice. Photo courtesy of Haughland House*

and an artist who has a weekly class which you can join.

The other change is that Claire Evans, a Trustee of Haughland House Trust, has taken over as manager and will be taking all bookings. Please see all the details on the website [www.orkneyretreat.org.uk](http://www.orkneyretreat.org.uk).

Meanwhile Bill and I are still living here in the cottage, but we may decide to move in April and let the Cottage out to self-catering if a buyer isn't found before then. Bill is having tests for Dementia which makes it more imperative that we live nearer family as soon as we can.

This is the link to the estate agent for the sale if you could please share on social media, and thanks for your continuing support. [www.lowsorkney.co.uk/p/12915#details](http://www.lowsorkney.co.uk/p/12915#details)

**Lesley Mckeown**

Shapinsay, Orkney

## Several Unitarians met Mary Hilton's fate

To the Editor:

I believe there are a number of other Unitarian families whose ancestors have been subjected to the impact of the Manchester Tramway works, such as that which occurred to Mary Hilton (*Inquirer*, 6 Dec) and my two great-grandparents, James and Elizabeth Cash. In the latter instance they were buried in the graveyard of the Platt Lane Unitarian Chapel, in Rusholme, in 1840.

In 1909 the Wilmslow Rd was widened by the Corporation, where it passes the chapel, for an extension to the tramway. A number of the graves in the churchyard were covered over by the new pavement! During my family history research, I have discovered that there were some 25 graves involved and that in 1923 the Corporation finally had the remains exhumed and reinterred with the gravestones, in the City's Southern Cemetery. If anyone would like further information, I would be pleased to help. Email: [jonclenn@btinternet.com](mailto:jonclenn@btinternet.com)

**Jon Clennell**

Sheffield

## Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to [inquirer@btinternet.com](mailto:inquirer@btinternet.com). Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes.

Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.



# Maybe your congregation needs a fire

I have just been to another Progressive Christianity Conference where one of the speakers, Peter Rollins (*The Idolatry of God, Insurrection, The Orthodox Heretic, The Divine Magician*, etc) spoke about ghosts.

There are the subjects, problems, disagreements that everyone knows about but nobody speaks about, that are repressed. And they manifest themselves in strange ways as ghosts – sometimes formation of cliques and muttering in corners (of which I have spoken before) and sometimes in disagreements and arguments about other, different issues.

Peter talked of the acceptably unacceptable or, if you prefer, the rotting bones within our whitened sepulchres. Of course, many groups, couples, congregations refuse to embrace difficulties preferring to proclaim that: 'we have no problems'. They are very well aware that they have problems but fear that bringing them out into the open will lead to what they call crisis: arguments, disagreements and possibly a breakdown of or a need to change the entire group. What the no-problemers fail to recognise is that they are already in crisis and dealing with recurrent problems – ghosts – that can never be solved because they are simply the manifestations of other more important problems.

Yes, I know it is a bit convoluted but if you think about it for just a few moments I am sure you will start to recognise the truth of this.

You have to, in Peter's terms, 'wrestle with the angel'. Jacob did this and won but came away with a new name and a 'new' walk. You have to be prepared for the changes that such a struggle may bring about. Have I not been urging you for ages to talk to each other, to talk to each other about really serious and meaningful things such as bad behaviour and worship?

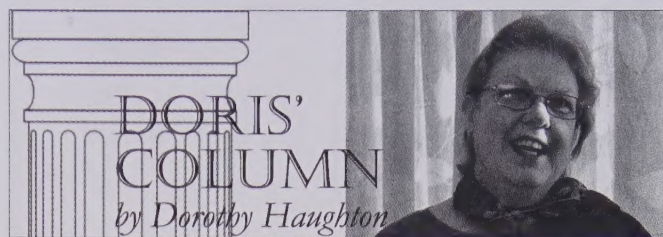
Now I am not urging you to rush into your church, chapel or meeting house to raise up all those issues that have been suppressed. This will only lead to lots of people being very upset. Rather you have to come at these issues indirectly; Peter suggests music, art, worship.

Peter talks about 'Pyrotheology':

*As the sequoia tree requires the minerals and clearing left by forest fires in order to grow, pyrotheology prepares the ground for a more fertile faith through self-critical dialogue and creative community events. By theoretically setting fire to the layers of belief we put over reality to protect ourselves from reality, pyrotheology seeks to ignite a sense of greater depth in life beyond the need for wholeness and certainty. Pyrotheology explores how the events testified to in the founding documents of Christianity invite us to fully embrace the reality of our brokenness and unknowing.*

*Pyrotheology does not seek to draw people into some kind of fractured existence, but rather to draw out the ways in which we already are fractured; a reality that our various cultural, political and religious narratives tend to eclipse. By short-circuiting the various techniques we use to avoid such self-confrontation and encouraging us to joyfully embrace what we unveil about ourselves through the process, the claim is that we will find that death is robbed of its sting and that a life in all its fullness is possible.*

He has created the Omega Course (the opposite of the Alpha Course). 'However, unlike the Alpha course, the conversation does not direct participants to a conclusion in which people are



encouraged to embrace the "right" doctrinal answer—instead, the conversation itself is what is deemed important.

'Disagreements are encouraged, and the passionate exchange of ideas is affirmed. By the end of the course, people thus experience firsthand that Christianity is not a rigid, monolithic, unchanging system of creeds, but rather a fluid tradition that welcomes interrogation and rigorous discussion.'

We Unitarians already have two courses that are designed to do very much the same thing: Build Your Own Theology and LifeSpirit. Could engaging in one of these courses help us to confront some of these 'ghosts'? And if people won't attend a course, can aspects of them be 'hidden' in the regular acts of worship.

Be aware of two things.

Anger is a way of defending ourselves against the truth. *Peter Rollins*

If you want to tell someone the truth, make them laugh otherwise they'll kill you. *Oscar Wilde*

And to start you off on your journey, here is a little story.

'A cat wanders into a worship session and disrupts it. This happens over several weeks. The leader takes the cat at the start of worship and ties it to a tree. When the leader dies his/her disciples take over and tie the cat to the tree. When the cat dies, they buy a new cat. When the tree dies, they buy a new tree.'

*Dorothy Haughton is a service leader in the midlands and an occasional columnist for 'The Inquirer'.*

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## New District minister for LDPA

The London and Southeast District – the LDPA – has a new District Minister. The LDPA Council has selected the Rev Martin Whitell as our new District Minister. Council members look forward to this new beginning and to working in harmony with Martin for the benefit of Unitarianism in Southeast England and the wellbeing of its member Unitarian fellowships and congregations.

– Wade Miller-Knight, LDPA Secretary

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## News in brief



UWG members re-enacted a famous movie scene at their weekend

### Women's Group had a great weekend

More than 35 women gathered in October at the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre, Great Hucklow, to take part in their annual conference. The women meet once a year to hold their AGM and to take part in workshops around a chosen theme. The theme this year was "Life through a Lens". Led by Kate Dean and Angela Maher we were invited to '...explore the different lenses through which we see our lives in a weekend of discussion, creativity and lots of laughter.' We discovered that our perceptions and world view may change according to age, expectations, circumstances and values. The workshops provided the framework for the weekend but the conversations which took place during mealtimes and between workshops were really the life-blood of the weekend. This was when new friendships were formed and old friendships renewed.

We laughed, we cried a little, we argued and got heated over topics close to our hearts and over which we didn't quite see eye to eye.

Over the years the Women's Group has tackled some serious and difficult issues. This is the point of our organisation; it is to be serious and aware when we need to be; try to change things that we think need to be changed; it is to nurture one another, hold those who need holding, encourage those who are faltering and all of this in a community of love, laughter and sharing.

Next Women's Weekend is Friday, 23 October to Sunday, 25 October. If you wish to know more about UWG please look at the website: [www.ukunitarians.org.uk/womensgroup](http://www.ukunitarians.org.uk/womensgroup)

— Stephanie Ramage

### Celebration of the life of Sheila Jones

Sheila Jones, well-known in Unitarian circles for her work on Religious Education programmes, died on 28 December. Her family is inviting Sheila's Unitarian friends to the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre at Great Hucklow on Saturday, 7 February 2015 at 3pm.

The service will be led by the Rev Liz Birtles and will take place in the Peach Room so that it can be seated in the 'round'. A light tea will be served afterwards. Please join the family in this important celebration of Sheila's life and work.

If you would like to book any further meals or overnight stays at Hucklow, please contact the Nightingale Centre directly on 01298 871218.

### Collaborative Ministry – triple baptism!

The Rev Jim Corrigan began his new Ministry by conducting baptisms for, not one, but three local babies after his first service for Padiham Unitarians in Lancashire! The Rev Jim is the first minister to serve the newly formed Lancashire Collaborative Ministry (LCM) which began in September. Initially, the LCM includes the existing congregations at Padiham and Rawtenstall. However, the intention is to raise the profile of Unitarianism in a wider area beyond these two congregations by holding events open to the public and exploring the possibility of seeding a new house group.

The Rev Jim and the LCM committee, will be concentrating efforts initially on improving communications and developing a media presence through Facebook, Twitter and an inclusive website in addition to increasing the use of posters and leaflets. Rev Jim has already been interviewed on local radio and in the local press.

This is an exciting new Ministry drawing on the findings and recommendations of the 'future ministry' project and utilising the skills and experiences of all concerned, led by Rev Jim and the LCM committee. We are looking forward to our first Christmas events as a Collaborative Ministry and to Jim's induction on Saturday, 28 February.

— Dot Hewerdine

### Channing lecture offered insights



History Brought To Life: The Rev Dr Ann Peart brought history to life in the latest annual Channing Lecture hosted by Golders Green Unitarians in November. Seen here in front of the famed Ivon Hitchens mural with minister Feargus O'Connor (left) and Chief Officer Derek McAuley, Dr Peart used William Ellery Channing's correspondence with British Unitarians to explore his considerable influence on both individuals and communities. Ann's in-depth research into the achievements of Unitarian women in the 19th century helped to illuminate the depth of connections forged primarily through letter writing in this era. Channing's disarming comment made in a letter to Lucy Aikin, niece of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, demonstrated his yearning to understand and brought to life his relationship with Lucy, especially his recognition of her as his intellectual equal. 'In looking over my letter I see that I have written too dogmatically. I rather intended to give you my views that I may obtain yours. I am too far from you to judge the true state of your country, and perhaps my error is always that I overlook details, and judge too much by general principles. Help to correct me.'

— Sarah Tinker